

Executive Summary

While Region 7 of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has done a thorough job in comprehensively evaluating recreational uses in Region 7 state forests, the New York Mountain Bicycling Coalition (NYMBC) and the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) strongly urge that the sections of the draft report that address bicycles be revised before the report is issued as final. These revisions are not needed simply because cyclists do not like the dramatic restrictions imposed by the plan. The purpose of the plan is *not* to please all users – it is only to accommodate recreational use within the context of protecting state forest natural resources. Rather, these revisions are required because:

- The draft plan is recommending dramatic reversals in management policy that are based on anecdotes rather than supported by documented justifications,
- The draft plan often inappropriately lumps bicycles together with motorized trail users and equestrians, which suggests a general bias against the use of bicycles on trails. This could lead some to question the objectivity of the report, and
- The draft plan seeks to codify many of its recommendations in the New York Code of Rules and Regulations (NYCRR) in order to apply them to all state forests in New York without adequate state-wide public input.

This comment package addresses each claim made by the draft report supporting its planned restrictions on bicycles. These comments show, in detail and with references, why the restrictions are not justified. Based on this analysis, NYMBC and IMBA strongly urge that the following major changes be made in the final recreation plan:

- Region 7 should *not* reverse its current management policy allowing bicycles on trails unless designated closed.
- The proposed wet-season closure period should be significantly shortened from the 6 months currently in the plan. At most, the seasonal closures should be limited to about two months in the spring. Preferably, the closure periods should be flexible based on actual weather conditions, especially at more popular forests. Volunteers can assist Region 7 in this determination through an adopt-a-resource agreement.
- The draft plan should *not* seek to codify many of the recommendations of the draft or final plan into 6NYCRR Part 190 making them apply state-wide.

Because of the size and scope of the draft plan, these items represent only the most significant changes needed in the plan. This report addresses both these major deficiencies in the plan, as well as commenting on the minor issues found throughout the draft plan. Notwithstanding these observations, NYMBC and IMBA commend Region 7 on the development of a truly comprehensive and thorough draft plan, and we support the efforts to protect the natural resources of state forests of central New York.

1. Introduction

The staff of Region 7 of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) have invested a considerable amount of energy preparing a comprehensive draft recreation master plan. This is a difficult task of breathtaking scope and they should be commended on their effort. In spite of this effort, or perhaps because of the large scope, recommendations on bicycling have been based on anecdotes and sweeping generalizations. Yet based on this shaky foundation, the draft plan seeks to make dramatic and significant changes in the way it manages bicycles. Indeed it proposes to stand the current bicycle management policy on its head, and make it contrary to how bicycles are managed in state forests throughout the rest of New York.

Cyclists object to many of the draft report's recommendations. However, management of state lands is not subject to a popularity contest. Article 9, Title 5 of the Environmental Conservation Law (ECL) states that the mission of the Division of Lands and Forests is to "care for and enhance the lands, forests, and natural resources in the State of New York for the benefit of all through the care, custody, and control of state owned lands, and promotion of the use and protection of all natural resources". We agree with the draft plan's aim to determine "what is best to protect the natural resources while providing opportunities for public recreation and use" (p. 11). The converse of this, however, is that when and if the draft plan makes recommendations, especially (as in the case of bicycling) recommendations that provide a complete reversal of a management policy and otherwise significantly restrict an activity, then strong evidence and documentation of threats to natural resources is needed to support the recommendation. In the case of bicycling, this is not provided by the draft plan. The justifications provided are often anecdotal. They are not supported either by the literature or by the summary of the comments received during the 1999 public comment period. Review of the document in its entirety reveals that the draft plan regularly lumps cycling together with motorized and equestrian use which is inappropriate and misleading. The recommendations need to be reconsidered and amended in light of the facts about bicycles use of forest trails.

Region 7 has indicated in personal communications that cyclists are overreacting to this draft plan. Cyclists are not overreacting. Proposing to change a policy from the current open-unless-

designated-closed to closed-unless-signed-open (p. 58) is a significant change, one that concerns us greatly. Region 7 has told cyclists that trails currently open to bicycles will remain open. This is not true. NYMBC held its inaugural summit in 1997 in Region 7, at the facilities of the Greek Peak ski resort. During this weekend meeting, NYMBC had a 3 to 4 hour ride on trails of the Tuller Hill state forest. The route avoided use of the Finger Lakes Trail, as it is a trail designated closed to bicycles in Region 7. Yet, the draft plan indicates that no trails whatsoever will be open to bicycles in not only Tuller Hill forest, but in all of Cortland County (except possibly portions of Morgan Hill State forest which is partially in Cortland County) (pp. 204 - 206). This is but one example of trail networks currently open to bicycles that will be closed by this plan. Even where trails are designated to be open to bikes, the draft plan says that trails would only be open after sustainability inspections (p. 58), which are not scheduled to be completed until 2004 or later (p. 116ff). Region 7 has indicated that the plan calls for new bicycle trails at several state forests. However, while Appendix 6 seems to indicate new trails in many state forests (p. 205 - 207), many of these "trails" will be part of the "Genny Green Trail" project. As described on p. 104, "most of the mountain bike trail mileage would be on dirt roads". Other "new" trail systems consist of forests where cycling is currently popular on existing trails. Overall, this plan calls for a significant net loss of bicycle trail mileage in Region 7. Even among the mileage the draft plan designates for bicycles, it is not clear what trails these miles refer to. The draft plan goes so far as to ban bicycles from all forest roads (unless signed open) (p. 35). It is not known how many miles of bicycle trails are not trails at all, but roads that will be signed open to bicycles.

Last, but certainly not least, the draft report calls for the reversal of mountain bicycle management policy to be codified in 6NYCRR (p. 114) and applied state-wide (p. 113). Not only is this inappropriate for a plan for which comments were solicited mainly from Central New York, but it raises other concerns. The draft plan may be interpreted as asking cyclists to accept significant restrictions in region 7 based in part on vague designations of trails to be open to bicycles. But if this policy is implemented state-wide, there would be no such mitigating factors in place elsewhere, and it could result in even greater reductions in trails open to bicycles throughout the state. Cyclists are certainly not overreacting to this draft plan.

This comment package does not comment on a forest-by-forest basis regarding which trails should be designated open to bicycles. For one thing, this is not possible to comment since the plan does not specify which trails it refers to in its designations. But more importantly, we do not comment on a forest-by-forest basis because we strongly urge that the draft plan be revised to retain the open-unless-designated-closed policy currently in effect in Region 7 and elsewhere in the state. We do not comment on a forest-by-forest basis because as a default, trails would be open to bicycles. As discussed further in the body of this comment package, some individual trails can or should be closed to bicycles (in most such cases, these trails should be closed to all users).

This comment package is arranged in the following manner. Section 2 presents the aspects of the draft plan to which NYMBC and IMBA agree. Our comments are not meant to be obstructionist; we support the development of a comprehensive recreation plan, and agree to much that is presented in the draft plan. Section 3 provides a detailed analysis of the premises on which Region 7 bases its recommendations. This section, supported by the literature, demonstrates that the premises are at best anecdotal and/or do not justify the recommended restrictions. Section 4 presents in detail the changes to the draft plan that NYMBC and IMBA strongly urge Region 7 to incorporate. These changes directly follow from our analysis of the draft plan's premises, and the deficiencies identified therein. Section 5 presents a more general response to the draft plan. Because the premises of the recommendations are in most cases weak, this section speculates on what may be some of the real motivations to the drastic revisions in management policy proposed by this plan, with our comments on this possible motivations. Section 6 provides concluding remarks.

Appendix A provides comments on various elements of the draft plan that directly or indirectly reference cycling. The main body of this comment package strives to provide a lucid analysis of the draft plan. But in doing so, many aspects of the draft plan that deserve comment do not fit seamlessly with the rest of the text. Appendix A comprises the complete response to the entire draft plan. Appendix B provides more detail, including photographs, of trail switchbacks. The presence of switchbacks in trails is presented in the draft report as one of the premises of the restrictive recommendations. These photographs and this discussion provide greater backup as to why this argument is groundless. Appendix C provides a copy of additional comments previously

submitted by electronic mail in response to a question from Region 7. Appendix D provides copies of selected references mentioned in the text. The comments provided in the appendices are of equal weight and importance as the text in the rest of this comment package.

2. Plan Recommendations With Which We Agree

Many aspects of the draft recreational plan will result in better mountain bicycling in Region 7 State Forests, and we support these recommendations. Furthermore, there are some recommendations that would *not* result in better mountain biking that we support in the interests of developing an overall comprehensive recreation plan.

We support the closure of trails that are inherently unsustainable. Such trails include those that go through wetland areas or other poorly drained soils, and soil-based trails that are routed along the fall line or otherwise have excessively steep slopes. Many trails that exhibit these properties can be reopened following reroutes and/or drainage improvements. Those that can not be so fixed should be blocked off, removed from the forest, and closed permanently to *all users*.

We support seasonal closure of most trails. Most impact to trails is during wet conditions. However, the recommended six-month closure period is much too long. The closure period should be limited to the period just before and after snowmelt, February 15 through April 15. Where possible, DEC or authorized volunteer organizations should be able to adjust these dates depending on actual trail conditions. Usage is typically much less in late fall wet conditions and should not be restricted then. During winter, usage can be prohibited when trails are covered with snow to preserve cross country skiing conditions. These limitations should not be exempted for Shindagin Hollow. As this is the most popular place for cycling in Region 7, these protections are needed here as elsewhere. These closure dates should apply, or at least be recommended for all other uses of trails, including hiking. More details on our specific recommendations are provided in Section 4.

We support the designation of 29 Region 7 state forests to be entirely without trails. This recommendation negatively impacts mountain bicycling, as this may eliminate areas that may be suitable for trail construction in the future, or in some cases may even be popular with cyclists now. However, we support this designation as part of an overall recreational management plan for Region 7, providing opportunities for solitary enjoyment of the forests.

There are many other elements of the plan with which we agree, but do not relate to mountain bicycling. We applaud Region 7 in their efforts to maintain and protect the natural resources of

the Region 7 state forests. However, in these comments, we are only addressing the parts of the plan that directly address mountain bicycling.

3. The Premises do not Justify the Recommendations

The Draft Recreational Plan is very comprehensive and consistently arranged. In the "Recreational Needs Assessment and Actions" section (Section IX), nineteen recreational activities are evaluated. For each activity, the following topics were addressed:

1. Description
2. Public Input
3. Current Opportunities
4. Environmental Impacts, Constraints, and User Conflicts Analysis
5. Decisions with Actions

In this process, The first three steps provide a concise summary of the activity as practiced in Region 7. Steps 4 and 5 then lay the basis for the recommendations in Step 6. For bicycling, the recommendations in Step 6 include a change in the current Region 7 policy from "open-unless-designated-closed" to "closed-unless-designated-open". Despite the plan's recommendation of "new" mountain bike trails, this change in management will result in reductions in available trails, especially considering that many of the "new" trails systems consist in large part of roads and/or existing trails.

The evaluation in steps 4 and 5 do not support the restrictions that are recommended in step 6. Below, the entire text of steps 4 and 5 (pp. 56 - 58) are reprinted with NYMBC/IMBA comments:

Environmental Impacts, Constraints, and User Conflicts

The combined weight of the bike and rider, how the bike is ridden, and the relatively narrow tires of the wheels cause soil compaction and rutting.

This sentence addresses several unrelated topics. The predicate of the sentence is "cause soil compaction and rutting". Trail design and construction manuals and courses routinely stress the importance of compacting the trail tread during trail construction. A well compacted trail tread combined with the proper outslope prevents erosion of tread material. Compaction of trail tread is a good thing. Rutting, on the other hand is bad. However, with properly designed and constructed trails, including adequate compaction, rutting does not occur. Rutting only occurs in wet conditions, and this is addressed below. The subject of the sentence addresses the pressure density

of cyclists on trails. Gordon Cessford, in his comprehensive review of the literature (published by the New Zealand Department of Conservation, 1995) summarized studies on this and found that "Mountain bikes will exert downward force through their tires, although the "mean ground contact pressure", which comprises the wheel load divided by the contact area (Soane et al. 1981, Smith and Dickson 1990) is likely to be less than that of heavier motorized vehicles, horses and heavily laden hikers." Bicycle pressure distributions would fall somewhere between a day hiker and a backpacker. Thus this is not a factor on which to regulate bicycles differently from hiking.

Continued use of the same paths of travel creates trails which lead to environmental concerns.

This point seems to suggest that Region 7 believes that bike travel off trail is a problem in state forests. This is not supported in any of the public meeting summaries, nor in the technical literature. In fact, in comparison to other trail users including hiking, horseback riding, or motorized use, bicycles are by far the least likely to leave the trail. Simply put, bicycles don't work off trail in densely wooded areas as found in Region 7 forests, and would be the least likely to cause environmental concerns from off-trail travel.

The most common types of impacts from mountain biking are trail impacts, soil impacts, water related impacts and aesthetic impacts.

Soil impacts include:

Widening of the trails to avoid problems in the trail such as water and downed trees. Trail braiding is associated with trail widening. Braiding occurs when there are several paths in close proximity which avoid the same obstacle.

This is a real problem on some trails. The primary cause of widening and braiding is wet conditions, and this is addressed in the next topic. However, this is a function of trail design and construction, and not bicycle use. In fact, on page 42 of the draft plan, under the section for hiking, the plan says "Most of these [long distance hiking] trails are in suitable locations. However, some portions are located in wet, poorly drained areas or on steep slopes that are highly erodible. This leads to wider and multiple trails around wet areas. Trails located on unsuitable locations can result in muddy or eroded trail conditions." Thus, this plan itself recognizes what

has been documented in the scientific literature: Impacts from hiking and cycling are equivalent in most circumstances, and are much less than impacts from non-human-powered recreation. The best studies of these comparative impact, although they are narrow in scope, are Seney (1990) and Thurston and Reader (2001).

Rutting occurs when the ground is too soft to support the weight of the vehicle and rider. This usually occurs in the autumn and spring when the ground is wet and soft and during wet periods during the rest of the year. Ruts collect rain water and runoff, keeping the trail wet. Ruts channel water, leading to erosion of the trail.

This statement is true for some trails in the spring or after heavy rains (though many trails are adequately drained and rarely develop ruts even in the wettest conditions). Cyclists dislike these conditions as much as any other trail user. This is why we support seasonal closures of trails, although not for the duration, and with the inflexibility, recommended in the plan. Please note that this is not unique to cyclist use. For example, in the Adirondack High Peaks region, which is closed to bikes, and very popular with hikers, the Adirondack Mountain Club regularly issues warnings for hikers to stay off the trails in spring time because the wet conditions present at that time accelerate trail damage from hiking. The draft plan provides no similar restrictions on trail use by hikers.

This statement supports the need for limitations on trail use in the spring. It does not, however, support a policy of blanket closure of trails throughout Region 7, unless signed. This statement refers only to trails where the topography does not allow adequate drainage. Trails that are inherently wet, such as those routed through wetlands or are on flat areas that can not be made to drain adequately, should be closed, not just to cyclists, but to all users. Trails that are built or repaired to provide adequate drainage do not lead to trail erosion from bicycle use.

Switchbacks are sometimes designed into a trail to allow a trail to zig zag up or down a hill to lessen the slope of trail and to minimize erosion. Shortcutting the switchbacks defeats the purpose of the switchback and leads to erosion.

If the turn radius of the switchback is too small, then it is difficult for novice to intermediate riders to successfully negotiate. However, it would be surprising if this is at all a common problem on Region 7 trails. The vast majority of trails do not include such switchbacks. This is not a valid

justification for adoption of a general closure of trails to bicycles. For the few situations where this problem exists, there are two options. The first is to reconstruct the switchback to the proper specifications that allow bicycle use. Cyclists are available and willing to help with this. Switchbacks constructed to the proper specifications regularly handle large volumes of bicycle traffic on trails in Region 9 without impact (see Appendix B). If this approach is not possible (due to other priorities), then the particular section of trail that contains the switchback could be closed to bicycle use until the switchback is reconstructed.

On unsuitable soils, trails need constant maintenance to control erosion. Where erosion cannot be controlled, the trails need relocation or closure.

This statement is true, but is unrelated to bicycle use. Unsuitable soils should not be used for trails, regardless of who would otherwise be using these trails. We fully support closure of unsustainable trails. These trails should be obstructed at intersections with other trails, and removed from the forest through placement of branches and other forest debris on the former tread. Signs placed at the former intersections explaining the reasons for trail removal help in deterring users from trying to reopen these trails.

Trees are often cut or damaged when trails are established by users without authorization. No consideration is given to other management actions that might occur on the site. This often results in conflicts with other activities. Unauthorized trails, when constructed in poor locations, increase the potential for erosion.

Again, this statement is true, but is unrelated to bicycle use. Unauthorized trail construction is illegal and is universally condemned by trail advocates. Region 7 has indicated that they believe that many unauthorized trails have been constructed by cyclists. If this is true, then it is unclear how restricting cycling opportunities through a closed-unless-open approach would discourage these lawbreakers, since their misguided efforts presumably stem from their perception of inadequate trail opportunities under present management policy. If illegal trail building is currently a problem, this problem would likely be exacerbated by the recommendations of this draft report.

It is also not clear how Region 7 has determined or otherwise documented that illegal trail construction *by cyclists* is a significant problem. If this is a serious enough problem to justify closing all trails to bicycles unless designated open, it is incumbent upon Region 7 to document and quantify the amount of trails that it believes have been illegally constructed by cyclists. Not only is such documentation/justification not presented in the draft plan, the draft plan gives reason to believe that Region 7 may be overestimating the amount of such trails. For example, the draft plan deems all trails in Shindagin Hollow, except the Finger Lakes Trail, as unauthorized (p. 56, also Appendix 6). In communications last April, Region 7 implied these trails were illegally made by cyclists. The fact is the vast majority of these trails were *not* created by cyclists. Most were present before cycling became a popular activity in state forests. Any conclusions made by the plan based on the assumption that these and other trails were made by cyclists is not based on an accurate understanding of existing trails.

Braking on steep Intentional skidding [*sic*] mainly to brake the vehicle on steep hills will lead to trail erosion.

Skidding is perhaps the only unique impact that bicycles have on trails in comparison to hiking. That is why bicycle advocates have been active in discouraging this behavior with the "skids are for kids" message. However, to a large extent, this again is a function of trail design rather than usage patterns. Quoting again from Cessford's literature review (1995), "Skidding can loosen track surfaces and move material downslope, and most significantly, promote the development of ruts which channel water-flow. The development of such ruts which can promote erosive water-flows to a greater extent than by foot-step puddling, is the most distinctly unique 'wheeling' impact.". But in the review of literature regarding hiking impacts, "Studies of human trampling have been extensive and diverse. For example, the trampling motions of feet were described in Holmes (1979), the effects of different types of boot sole were compared by Kuss (1983), and the forces exerted on surfaces by walking were investigated by Quinn et al. (1980). Quinn et al. (1980) noted that damage from feet was caused first by the downward compaction forces from the heel early in the step, and then from rotational shearing forces from the toe at the end. The shearing action was found to be most important, particularly through soil deformation and "smearing" in wet conditions, and was found to be greatest on up-slope travel. Downhill walking was not

investigated in the analysis by Quinn et al. (1980), but separate work by Weaver and Dale (1978) and Weaver et al. (1979), found that downhill stepping (by foot and hoof) was more erosive than downhill motorbiking. This was due to the greater downward forces exerted through the heels in down-stepping. The importance of this distinction between downhill and uphill stepping was emphasized by Bayfield (1973), who found that although 20 percent fewer steps were taken on downhills than uphills, the erosive impacts of downhill stepping was still higher." Cessford's conclusion regarding impact on steep slopes was "However, where skidding does not occur, impacts from the normal rolling effects of wheels would likely be less than those of foot steps." The emphasis on skidding in the cycling section of the plan without commensurate discussion of the impacts of steep trail design and construction on trail sustainability under hiking use suggests a bias against cycling use of trails.

Additionally, this sentence refers to bicycles as vehicles. Since New York State Law specifically excludes bicycles from its definition of vehicles (Title 1, Article 1, Chapter 71 of NYS Consolidated Laws), referring to bicycles as vehicles in this sentence consciously or unconsciously associates cyclists with motorized trail users, which is inappropriate.

Water quality impacts include:

- Siltation of nearby water resources from riding on wet and muddy trails.**
- Erosion of stream banks where the trail crosses a stream.**
- Erosion of trail surface.**

Sediment suspension in streams can impact fish survivability, and thus trail management must take this into account. However, once again, this issue is mainly governed by trail design, and is not unique to trail use by bicycles. We support the use of rock fords and other hardened crossings where trails cross permanent streams. Aligning the stream crossing at right angles is the most effective way of reducing sedimentation at trail crossings. In any event, this is not an issue that would call for management of bicycles differently from hiking.

Aesthetic impacts:

- Muddy, rutted, poorly designed and maintained trails are all aesthetically unpleasant to other users of the forests.**

As mentioned above, these aesthetic impacts are as unpleasant to cyclists as to other forest users. We support efforts to eliminate "muddy, rutted, poorly designed and maintained trails" from Region 7 state forests.

Some of the physical and environmental constraints on mountain bike trail development are steep slopes, poorly drained soils, limited public access, actual and potential user conflicts, the lack for parking areas, and impacts on rare and endangered species. Competitive/organized trail rides require a temporary revocable permit (TRP) from the Department. See page 13 for discussion on TRPs.

All of these are constraints on trail development and usage in general, and do not support implementation of stricter controls on bicycles. Of these constraints, one, "rare and endangered species" is actually applicable to all trail use *except* cycling at least with respect to plant species. As noted above, bicycles do not work off trail in dense forests as found in Region 7, and thus cycling, as opposed to most other trail uses, is not expected to impact rare and endangered plant species, except in the case of development of new trails.

The following are conflicts which have been identified;

Mountain bikes and mountain bikers make little noise when riding the trails. Conflicts may occur when horseback riders and horses are startled when they are approached from behind and taken by surprise.

Right of way is a usual conflict occurring between mountain bikers and hikers on the same trail.

Mountain bikers sometimes feel threatened by the presence of hunters on or nearby the trails.

The plan does not document how these conflicts were identified. Presumably they were identified either through public input, Region 7 review of literature, or Region 7 personal experience. The only summary of public input in this planning process is Appendix 1 of the draft plan, which comes with the disclaimer that this is not an accurate count of actual public comments.

Notwithstanding this disclaimer, the meeting summaries do not support that these conflicts are significant enough to warrant the drastic changes in bicycle management proposed by this plan. Out of 54 counted comments about "conflicts with other recreationists", the summary counts only 6 comments from hikers about mountain bikes (in general), and 1 from an equestrian that may be interpreted as possible complaints about startling or right-of-way contention. It is not surprising that there are so few comments on this. Cycling advocates have heavily promoted the

message of yielding the trail to hikers and horses. Yielding involves slowing down, and allowing the other trail user to acknowledge your presence before passing. Right of way conflicts were more prevalent, perhaps, in the earlier days of mountain biking. However, today all but the most novice cyclist today understands the importance of being polite on the trails. The proposed trailhead kiosks will also provide a means to better educate users on the rules of the trail, and will further reduce user conflicts.

4. Changes Needed in the Draft Recreation Plan

NYMBC and IMBA take issue with a number of individual elements of the draft plan. Many of these are minor and changes need only be small word changes or clarifications. These are presented in detail in Appendix A. However, there are four overarching changes that need to be made before the final plan is released.

1. Retain the current open-unless-designated-closed bicycle management policy. This is the most important issue to us. There is no documented justification presented in the draft plan for abandoning the current management approach. The current management strategy, open-unless-designated-closed is the mode of management used throughout the rest of the state, and it works. Environmental and aesthetic impacts are managed by the closure of unsustainable trails. Unsustainable trails should be closed to all users, and removed from the forest.

We strongly urge that this change in management approach be removed from the plan because the premises provided do not justify such dramatic measures. Beyond that, however, we have real concerns over its impact on bicycle access in Region 7 and throughout the state. On the face of it, the draft plan's intention to open sustainable trails to bicycles and our recommendation to close unsustainable trails should result in the same trail designation pattern. However, the Region 7 staff manages 117 state forests totaling 195,000 acres. Because of staff and time constraints, Region 7 is in many cases not as familiar with all the forests as are its users. While the draft plan does provide for Region 7 to designate sustainable trails open to bicycles, we are not convinced that Region 7 has a comprehensive enough inventory of the existing trails on these 195,000 acres to efficiently and timely designate which trails are to open to bicycles. The result would be a much greater reduction in cycling opportunities than are otherwise justified. Many trails that are important to cyclists -- sustainable trails -- would be closed. This concern was amplified this past spring during meetings between cyclists and Region 7 regarding a planned timber sale. Most cyclists are not opposed to timber sales and did not ask for a halt of the sale. However, we met to voice our concerns about the impact of the sale on some trails; trails that were *not* constructed by cyclists. The Region 7 representatives were not aware of these trails and were not taking them into account during the timber sale plans. If Region 7 is unaware of the presence of trails, it can not designate them open.

Of course, the converse of this argument could be made, that the amount of area to cover makes it difficult to designate all trails that need to be closed in a timely manner. However, the majority of trails are sustainable (even without minor maintenance), and probably would remain open. There are fewer trails that need to be closed than will remain open. A blanket closure would result in more trails being closed than justified. Cycling organizations would be willing to work with Region 7 to identify which trails need to be designated closed. It is in our best interest that only sustainable trails be available.

2. Reduce the duration of the wet season closure, but extend it to include Shindagin. The six month closure of all trails is excessive and not justified. Fall and spring typically produce wet conditions even on the most sustainable trails. However, the impacts on trails arise disproportionately from spring time usage. Fall usage is generally much reduced due to lack of daylight, deer hunting season, and the fact that many cyclists have just finished a great summer of cycling, and don't feel as inclined to hit the trails in these wetter and colder conditions. Any impacts from the few riders in the late fall are minor in scope and are generally erased by frost heaves and the weight of snow cover during the winter. In contrast, in spring, there is a pent-up demand for cycling, resulting in some people going out earlier than they should. It is during this period that seasonal restrictions are required.

The seasonal closure **period should be flexible.** Granted, it is difficult to survey the condition of the trails throughout the Region 7 forests. However, authority to review trail conditions at popular forests could be delegated to volunteer organizations through the adopt-a-resource program. Where it is not practical to evaluate the trails or designate organizations, a default closure period of **February 15 - April 15** is all that is appropriate. As discussed above, fall impacts are not significant. During winter, it is important to keep bicycles off trails suitable for skiing. However, this is simply addressed by designating trails **closed when snow sufficient for skiing is present on the trails.** This is a simple solution to what is in all likelihood a small or very localized problem. Few, if any, cyclists ride when there is that much snow on the trails. It doesn't work. The limited amount of cycling that takes place in mid winter is on packed snowmobile trails, where usage would not conflict with skiing.

There is no justification provided in the plan for excluding Shindagin Hollow from a (two-month) seasonal closure¹. Excluding this forest sends the wrong message to forest users - that is OK to ride in wet conditions. Funneling riders from the whole region to one forest will result in too high usage rates during this period. It only encourages damage of otherwise sustainable trails. This could cause problems for usage for the rest of the year, and would artificially create conditions that others could misconstrue as reasons why bicycles could be banned everywhere, when in fact it is due to policies funneling rides onto few trails when inappropriate.

3. The plan should stipulate that all trail closure plans be submitted to organized cycling groups prior to implementation. As stated above, trails should be managed as open unless designated closed. For each state forest, Region 7 should work with a local cycling organization to review planned closures before they are implemented. Some trails may need permanent closure due to soil conditions. Others may need reroutes, drainage work, or other maintenance work. For these latter trails, Region 7 and local cycling group should agree upon what needs to be done, set a schedule for the changes to be satisfactorily completed (whether by volunteer labor or by DEC), and only close the trail if this schedule is not met.

4. The draft plan should not seek to codify many of the recommendations of the draft or final plan into 6NYCRR Part 190 to make them apply state-wide. First, while there are many aspects of the draft plan to which we agree, the two most important issues that we see needing revision before this plan goes final (plans to reverse the bicycle management approach to closed-unless-open, and the six-month closure of all trails) are the only two bicycle-related elements that the draft plan recommends to be codified in statewide regulations. These restrictions should neither be applied in Region 7, nor be applied statewide. Secondly, it is wrong to apply recommendations developed in one regional office, based on input and comment solicited and received primarily from one region only, to regulations that would apply state wide. On this basis, the entire Section XII should be removed from the final plan.

¹There is less unanimity among cyclists for this element of this recommendation. Some believe that Shindagin, as well as Jenksville and Oakley Corners should be considered for year-round cycling.

5. The Recreation Plan should not make the distinction between foot trails and multipurpose trails. Rather it should distinguish between human-powered and non-human-powered activities. This recommended distinction more adequately reflects the difference between impacts of the various user groups. The plan's foot/multipurpose distinction incorrectly suggests that hiking activity deserves special attention and unique attention among the human-powered activities in the recreation plan. The designation of "multipurpose" may, in some people's minds cause cycling to be associated with motorized use or horseback riding. Motorized and horse trails require specialized construction, whereas the requirements for all human-powered trail uses are the same.

5. General Comments not Directed at Specific Elements of the Draft Plan

Specific analyses and critique of the premises that purport to justify the mountain bicycle management recommendations, as well as the changes needed for the final recreational plan, are discussed in the previous two sections. The draft plan's recommendations to switch to a closed-unless-designated-open policy are based primarily on the impact issues, which are shown in these sections to be poorly justified or undocumented.

But all the research and impact studies in the world do not avoid three simple concepts that may really be at the heart of the draft plan's recommendation to dramatically change how bicycles are managed in Region 7: (1) There are many sections of poorly-designed trails where impacts from bicycles are evident, (2), Some other forest users just plain don't like bicycles because it impacts their experience in the woods, and (3), Some folks have constructed illegal trails in the forest. Each of these are discussed below.

(1). Anyone arguing for restrictions to bicycle access can find an example in a state forest of a degraded trail that shows evidence of bicycle use. This may be presented as empirical evidence that contradicts what studies have shown, namely that impacts are similar to hiking, an activity that is not restricted whatsoever in this draft plan. However, this empirical "evidence" does not support disproportionate impacts from bicycles. As demonstrated elsewhere, this impact is in most cases entirely a function of trail design. Trails that can not be rerouted, or have their drainage improved, need to be closed. When this happens, this empirical reason will no longer exist. Furthermore, for every instance where such impact is observed, countless counter examples can be presented where use, whether by hikers or bicycles, has not resulted in such impacts. A well-designed trail with very heavy use often erodes less than a poorly-designed trail with light use, regardless of user type.

(2). For some users, most often hikers, the mere presence of a bicycle in the trail is disturbing. A person's feelings are incontrovertible; there is no question that these people are genuinely upset by seeing a bicycle. However, the flip side of this situation needs to be considered. Cyclists who are told they can not ride on a given trail, despite the fact that they would have no greater impact than the hikers who are allowed on the trail, are also genuinely upset. Probably even more so. The fact

that there are no restrictions on hiking whatsoever (nor even mention of trail closures in the hiking activity section, even for unauthorized or illegal trails), and the fact that the plan only identifies "foot trails" and "multipurpose trails" (consciously or subconsciously grouping cyclists in with equestrians and motorized users), suggests that the plan presupposes the needs and desires of hikers outweigh those of cyclists and other users. This issue, unlike trail design and construction, can not be resolved through any specific action. We concede that to meet the needs of some users, some trails will have to be designated hiking-only. However, we do request that Region 7 reexamine the motivations behind the recommendations, and give greater consideration to the impact this has on the cyclists who enjoy the forests.

(3). The issue of illegal trail construction is mentioned only obliquely in the draft plan. Two sentences discuss this in the Environmental Impacts section. But more importantly, it is listed as one of the three main reasons for adopting a "closed-unless-open" policy for cyclists. Unauthorized trail construction is both illegal and detestable. It undermines trust between forest users and managers and trail users. It directly conflicts with the mission of the DEC which is to manage the forests in a way that meets the needs of various users while maintaining environmental quality. For this reason, it is understandable if Region 7 staff, including the authors of this plan, takes these trails as a personal affront. It is not clear, but this could be one of the major motivations for the drastic changes in management policy that the draft plan proposes. But it is questionable whether all the facts are weighed correctly on this issue. For example, currently Region 7 recognizes no trails at Shindagin Hollow (other than the FLT), while in fact there are many. The impression we get is that Region 7 believes these trails were entirely made by cyclists. This is not correct. Bicyclists may have constructed some of the unauthorized trails, but the vast majority have been present for 10 years or more. Some were made by motorized users long ago, or perhaps recently in some cases. The origin of others is unknown, but their age predates the increase in cycling. Hikers also create unauthorized trails, both deliberately and through casual, repetitive travel. Yet their unauthorized trail building is not used to justify restrictions on hiking. Decisions made in this plan should not be made assuming most trails in the forest that are not on an official DEC map were made by cyclists, because that is incorrect. Nor should all users of the forests be punished for the lawlessness of the few individuals that do build illegal trails. Those individuals should be caught and punished, and their trails closed. But this should not mean that all trails in Region 7 state forests should be closed to bicycles, unless signed open.

6. Concluding Remarks

In Section IV of the draft plan ("Why a Region 7 State Forest Recreation master Plan is Needed") cycling is singled out as a use that grew significantly during the 1990's (p. 6). This is true. However, as the popularity of cycling has grown, so has the involvement of cycling volunteers in working with the DEC in managing this growth. Today, cyclists are one of the most active volunteer groups in the New York state forest system, literally from one end of the state to the other. Long Island sports the largest mountain bicycling association in the state (CLIMB), which has developed a tremendous network of trails with the Region 1 DEC. In Region 9, cyclists are identified as the most active, and most knowledgeable trail volunteers in the region. Cycling Clubs in Regions 4, 5, 6, and 8 have been working with DEC across upstate New York on development of new trails and maintaining existing trails on state forest land. This includes the Adirondack Mountain Bicycling Initiative which is working very closely with the DEC in developing and improving cycling opportunities in Regions 5 and 6. Similarly, cycling organizations work closely with the DEC Region 3 on trails in the Catskills. Cycling clubs are very active in the Region 7 area, especially near Syracuse and Binghamton, although most of their trail efforts have been focused on state and county parks. The increase in cycling presents a challenge to land managers, just as the increase in hiking and camping presented a challenge in the 60's and 70's. However, just as in that period, volunteers from trail user organizations have risen to the need and have provided not only direct "sweat equity" assistance to land managers, but also have developed education programs to help trail users better understand trails.

This cooperation between cyclists and DEC forest managers has made the open-unless-designated closed management policy work. Trails are improving around the state, natural resources are protected, and cyclists are enjoying the trails. This policy should be retained in Region 7 as well.

7. References

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